"Insight's Perseverance: *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*"

After playing billiards, Count Greffi, in *A Farewell to Arms*, asks Frederic what he has been reading.[1] The question comes after the latter's insistence that he would rather not talk about the war, something that, as one might expect in Hemingway-style dialogue, he certainly will talk about, just a page later. I want to start my presentation by looking at the conversation that ensues. Frederic answers to the Count's question with, I think we all agree, a familiar sentiment:

> '[...] What have you been reading?'
> 'Nothing,' I said. 'I'm afraid I am very dull.'
> 'No. But you should read.'
> 'What is there written in war-time?'
> 'There is *Le Feu* by a Frenchman, Barbusse. There is *Mr. Britling Sees Through It*.'
> 'No, he doesn't.'
> 'What?'
> 'He doesn't see through it. Those books were at the hospital.'
> 'Then you have been reading?'
> 'Yes, but nothing any good.' (*A Farewell To Arms*, 226)

Indeed, the ninety-four year old Count Greffi misremembers the title of Wells's famous wartime book and Frederic is not the kind of person to let such a lapse in memory and cognitive clarity pass without comment; noting that, in fact, Mr. Britling does not see through it, but he sees it through. Even though we can all agree that ninety-four year olds should not be let off the hook so easily just because of their venerable age, the mistake seems trivial enough – especially considering the copious amounts of champagne that are consumed by the Count and his interlocutor (we are after all, talking about a book by Hemingway). However, it seems that the elderly Count is not alone in his confusion. The anonymous 1918 French translation of *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* was called *Mr. Britling commence à voir clair*, a title that, as Annie Escuret points out in her contribution to the collection *The Reception of H. G. Wells in Europe*, was mistranslated.[2] A literal translation of the French back into English amounts to the phrase: *Mr. Britling starts to see it clear* or even plain. In both these confusions of the title of Wells's book, we encounter the mixing up of two constructions. One is used in the actual title: 'to see it through', which means that something that already began

[1] See also Harrington, Gary. "Partial Articulation: Word play in A Farewell To Arms." *The Hemingway Review* 20.2 (Spring 2001): 59-75. p. 61. I will not engage with Harrington's interpretation of the scene.
[2] See Escuret, Annie. "Henry-D. Davray and the *Mercure de France*." *The Reception of H. G. Wells in Europe*. Ed. Patrick Parrinder and John S. Partington. London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2005. pp. 28-47. p. 42. The French translation was publish in Paris at the Librairie Payot.

was finished but with considerable difficulty, it denotes a kind of perseverance in doing something that presents many obstacles. In fact, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (that is, its website) even references Wells's book as an example to clarify the meaning of 'to see through' – apparently to little avail. The other construction, as it is understood by Count Greffi and the French translator, is 'to see through it', to manage to come to a realization by piercing a barrier that prevents sight, an insight that goes beyond the appearance of something. My argument in this paper will be that what is at stake here is not necessarily only the unfortunate 'mistakes' and mistranslations of the book's title, which, I suspect, we can find even more examples of. To be sure, in a letter to a Geneva agent that helped arrange for translations of his books (one Marie Butts), Wells comments on "the change in title" of the French translation and says he "quite agrees with [Butts's] suggestion" that, as we presume together with the editor of *The Correspondence*, she should attempt to change it.[3] Although the letter is not completely clear on this issue, what I will attempt to show is that *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* is not just coincidentally a title that is psycho-linguistically susceptible to a metathesis of its last two words, but that this particular misreading presents precisely the stakes that are set out in the book. Or, to put it a little differently, that to understand *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* as a document of the imaginative effort to give place to, to make sense of the first world war, is also to take in the mistakes about its title and search for what they seem to tell us about this text.

That *Mr Britling* is an important book for its time and its period is not only reflected by the exceptional success at the time of publication, which was huge and was only surpassed during Wells's career by the immediate hit of *The Outline of History*.[4] Sidney Dark, although not the most impartial purveyor of judgment, writes in his 1922 book on Wells's oeuvre:

> [It] is one of the invaluable documents of the Great War. It is a careful and extraordinarily accurate record of the feelings of the English people of the liberal-minded middle class during the most menacing years in the whole history of their country. If posterity wants to know what England felt during the first two years of the Great War – and it is probable that posterity may have a considerable curiosity in this respect – there is no contemporary record, that I know, that will tell it so much. (Dark 119-120)

Let us leave "what England felt" aside and consider the feeling of resonance rather than that of representation. The text spoke to the audience at the Home Front and it at no point attempts

[3] H. G. Wells to Marie Butts, 30 April 1916. *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*. Ed. David C. Smith. 4 Vols. London: Pickering & Chatto, 1998. II: 456.
[4] For the sources on this see Simon J. James. *Maps of Utopia: H. G. Wells, Modernity, and the End of Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. p. 167.

to obscure its desire to not only appeal to that audience, but also to influence it. The book is in itself also a collection of different documents and modes of discourse, since it holds several letters from Mr. Britling's son Hugh who, despite being too young, enlists in the army to fight in the war. In addition, it contains discussions between Mr. Britling and his American guest Mr. Direck on the issue of his country's lack of participation in the war, as well as other conversations that attempt to represent contemporary opinions about the war. More so perhaps than representing the feelings of middle class liberals during the war, the book actively seeks to shape them by attempting to translate the events of the Great War into a discourse for those left at home. We only get in touch with the reality of trench warfare through the letters that Hugh sends his father, in addition to the conversations with Lady Frensham and staff officer Raeburn; much in contrast with Barbusse's *Le Feu* which is an autobiographical trench diary. The main tactic to persuade its readers is the book's attempt at showing the trajectory that Mr. Britling follows in order to come to a stable attitude towards the world, one that allows him to function as a writer and thinker after getting hit by the terrible news of war, leading up to the final dramatic moment when he receives the message that his son Hugh, child of Britling's late first wife, was killed in the trenches. Mr. Britling has a starting position at the beginning of the book, before the war, and changes that position as the war moves closer (but never too close) to his own life. It is this process of coming to terms with the tragedy of his own life and that of the world that I want to bring under attention here.

Plain enough, the shift in Mr. Britling's thinking about the war is formally embodied in the structure of the novel. Book I (of 3), "Matching's Easy at Ease", sketches a sense of complacency that took hold of Mr. Britling just as it took hold of the nation:

> how excellent was the backwardness of Essex and English go-as-you-please, and how through good temper it made in some mysterious way for all that was desirable. A fat English doctrine. *Punch* has preached it for forty years [...] He hadn't failed. Indeed he counted as a success among his generation [...] He was widely known, reputably known [but] [b]eneath that hollow, enviable show there ached waste. Waste, waste, waste – his heart, his imagination, his wife, his son, his country. . . . (*Britling*, 117-118)

The threat of waste, of something that is not used for anything, that serves no purpose, becomes reality at the very last sentences of Book I, with the advent of War:

> 'I am the Fact,' said War, 'and I stand astride the path of life. I am the threat of death and extinction that has always walked beside life, since life began. There can be nothing else and nothing more in human life until you have reckoned with me. (182)

The curious metaphor Wells is labouring here, is that war is as the incarnation of death, the death that blocks the path of life, the course of which death itself was already a part of, but now this course of life is interrupted by the Fact (capital 'F') of that death, the undeniable reality of "death and extinction." If we focus on the language of evolution in this passage, we can see that the fact of war constitutes the forced interruption of a teleology that is biological, the drive to survive, but perhaps more so, political, the drive to come to a better world, the world that Mr. Britling the public intellectual is actively attempting to establish through the writing of journalism. As such, this moment of crisis challenges the optimism of being able to create a better world, the optimism of Mr. Britling's first journalistic reactions to the event of war. For the sake of the length of my presentation I will not go into the significant parallels and also breaks with Wells's famous tract *Anticipations*, of which I think this book is both the reinstatement as well as the critique. I will, however, say that the vision that *Anticipations* holds is similar to Mr. Britling's before that vision is threatened by the event of the war. However, the crisis of the failure of optimism through a confrontation with pessimistic reality, is later on in the book supplanted by a much deeper crisis. This moment is reached in section 16 of Book II, a section I need to quote substantially to allow the depths of the despair to reach its full effect:

> 'When it began I did not believe that this war could be like other wars,' [Mr. Britling] said. 'I did not dream it. I thought that we had grown wiser at last. It seemed to me like the dawn of a great clearing up. [This is literally in *Anticipations*] I thought the common sense of mankind would break out like a flame, an indignant flame, and consume all this obsolete foolery of empires and banners and militarism directly it made its attack upon human happiness […] I saw this war, as so many Frenchmen have seen it, as something that might legitimately command a splendid enthusiasm of indignation.... It was all a dream, the dream of a prosperous comfortable man who had never come to the cutting edge of life […] It is a war now like any other of the mobbing, many-aimed cataclysms that have shattered empires and devastated the world; it is a war without point, a war that has lost its soul, it has become mere incoherent fighting and destruction, a demonstration in vast and tragic forms of the stupidity and ineffectiveness of our species....' (351)

War is not a chance for the forces of the future to accelerate hopeful change as it was in *Anticipations* and also in the beginning of *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*. It gets closer and closer to the bottomlessness of its inextricable suffering as it slowly seeps through to Mr. Britling's quiet and protected life. We are almost witnessing the embrace of what I will call, as a kind of shortcut, a radical materialism: there is not only no purpose to war, but it has lost almost all its capacity of meaning. With this move, Mr. Britling arrives at a position that denies a teleological significance to the event of war for history, that is, history understood as

an inevitable progression of sanity and reason. And yet, this embrace is not *total* and it is also not *final*. Its totality is prevented by the typically Wellsian exasperation (although one can hardly deny the significance of this line of thought in modernity as a whole) with the inefficiency of the species. Something that is inefficient is like a machine, like something that has an optimal functioning but this functioning is somehow prevented. The inefficiency of the species is therefore not a destruction or total annihilation of the very process of the machine of human interaction, just its unfortunate malfunctioning. One more example can illustrate this nuance. At the moment when Mr. Britling receives the news of his son Hugh's death, he says to himself: "'My God! How unutterably silly…. Why did I let him go? Why did I let him go?'" This silliness I believe can be read in two ways. Either the silliness is that of absurd nothingness, a silliness that laughs in the face of every pretention to find meaning within suffering; or, it is the silliness of exasperation, the perhaps even more devastating (although it depends on how you look at it) realization that it might have gone so much better, if only the world was good.

I will end my presentation in the familiar fashion, namely, by going back to the beginning. If we again think about the two possibilities of the title, one wishing insight where it is lexically denied and one seeking perseverance while it is not really clear in what Mr. Britling exactly perseveres; we can find a common element in both. Both options are about this process of Mr. Britling, the final stage of which I have as of yet said nothing about. There is a reason why the materialism in the last passage I quoted was not only not *total*, but also not *final* in the book. Part III, or, I should say, book III, bears the title "The Testament of Matching's Easy", which sketches a lapse into religion by Mr. Britling, completely in line with the threat of the loss of meaning. Risking despair and dissolution, Mr. Britling seeks not consolation, but the active principle of the good he was challenged to abandon by the violence of the war: God. This was also noted by Maxim Gorky. The book is undoubtedly, so writes Gorky in a 1916 letter to its author, "the best, most daring, truthful, and humane book written in Europe during the course of this accursed war!"; but nevertheless, as Roger Cockrell informs us in his contribution that I am quoting here, Gorky added that "he could not agree with the novel's conclusion, in which Mr Britling, like Levin at the end of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1873-77), arrives at the notion of God as the fount of all life and meaning."[5] Arriving at the name 'God' (because one could make the point that it is just a name here) is in

[5] Cockrell, Roger. "Future Perfect: H. G. Wells and Bolshevik Russia, 1917-32." *H. G. Wells in Europe*. Ed. Patrick Parrinder & John S. Partington. London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2005. pp. 74-90. pp. 80-81. Gorky's letter is quoted by Cockrell from Gorky, Maxim. *Selected Letters*. Trans. & Ed. A. Barratt and B. P. Scherr. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997. p. 195.

a way the perseverance of the Wellsian ideal and certainly, as his oeuvre the following decades show, it seems very plausible that this is what Wells himself had in mind. However, when Gorky is saying that he did not really like the end, I think he is referencing the sense in which insight into the meaninglessness of war was actually his preferred conclusion. It is therefore, I think, that Siegfried Sassoon, the archetypal wartime poet of the senselessness and violence of war, quoted in his wartime diary exactly this passage from *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*, a passage that does not come at the end of the book (seeking divine release from the predicament of losing sense, of losing meaning), but in part II, before the resolution Wells sought in the language of theology.[6] Indeed, the title merely indicates persistence in the ideals that were already clear at the beginning. We have no catharsis or anagnorisis, and we can surely find good reason as to why there is none. But the mere fact that Count Greffi, the French translator, Gorky, and perhaps Sassoon were looking for it, despite grammatical objections, illustrates the workings of this text as a truly revealing document in the history of our thinking on the Great War. Thank you.

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[6] Sassoon, Siegfried. *Diaries, 1915-1918*. Ed. Rupert Hart-Davis. London: Faber and Faber, 1983. pp. 109-110.